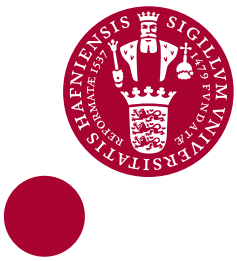

Review of Eric Chelstrom: Social Phenomenology: Husserl, Intersubjectivity, and Collective Intentionality

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Social Phenomenology: Husserl, Intersubjectivity, and Collective Intentionality

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Social Phenomenology: Husserl, Intersubjectivity, and Collective Intentionality
By Eric Chelstrom
Lexington Books, 2013. Pp. ix + 235. ISBN 978-0-739-17308-4.
£44.96/$64.61 (hbk).

Scholarly work on Husserl's theory of intersubjectivity abounds, and yet, the question whether classical phenomenology has the resources to resolve the issue between individualist and non-individualist approaches to sociality, or is beset by the specters of solipsism, is far from being settled.

Against this background, Chelstrom's excellent book represents a bold and refreshing outlook. For Chelstrom does not rest satisfied with simply rehearsing well-known arguments pro or contra (transcendental) solipsism, or discussing Husserl's theory of empathy. Instead, he brings phenomenology critically, and yet with much mutual benefit, to bear on the topic of collective intentionality and plural agency, which are at the forefront of current debates in analytic philosophy of action and social ontology. Chelstrom's contribution, however, is not only a timely book; it is tightly focused and thoroughly argued, in a remarkably jargon-free, straightforward fashion, which allows even the phenomenologically uninitiated to find the views presented easily accessible.

To be sure, Chelstrom does make an effort to defend Husserl from the charge of solipsism and individualism (esp. ch. 7), and does so, in my view, successfully; but from the outset, the anti-solipsistic argument is carried out and backed up within the overall project of providing a phenomenological explanation of genuinely collective intentionality (henceforth, CI), rather than just taking into account social or intersubjective relations. On the face of it, it may be surprising that the vindication of phenomenology's anti-solipsism is fleshed out within a robustly individualistic framework. This, however, turns out to be unsurprising if one considers that individualism in social ontology and the CI-debate is not on a par with solipsism, but is rather to be understood as the conceptual dichotomy to collectivism, roughly, the claim that in some sense or other (intentional-psychological, normative, epistemological, or metaphysical) and in some cases (e.g., in group agency) individuals may be 'outflanked' or 'overridden' (Pettit) by social entities and their laws or regularities. Against this view, Chelstrom forcefully proposes and defends a 'non-collectivistic', but, importantly, also 'non-atomistic' view of individual *and* plural subjects. According to this, there are phenomenologically *bona fide* experiences of collectives and group agents, a 'we-mode' sense of 'togetherness' and 'jointness' in experience, thought and action, but where these are not 'borne' or performed by plural subjects themselves, but exclusively by the respective individuals.

Chelstrom's argument for this view is distinctively Husserlian in that it explicitly assumes and reinforces a comprehensive philosophy of mind, and, in particular, a theory of consciousness, according to which intentionality is an irreducible and intrinsic (i.e., here, non-derivative) property of individual

conscious subjects. Accordingly, Chelstrom (p. 14) is very clear that an adequate theory of (collective) action ought to be consistent with the respective theory of mind and, specifically, must be able to explain how (collective) agency is related to (individual) subjects of conscious mental states.

This original take affords Chelstrom, in line with his explicit aim, to adjust and ultimately to 'correct' (p. 1) certain misleading or erroneous assumptions, which typically underlie most of current discussions of CI both in the analytic and the Husserl-critical phenomenologist camp. Above all, he identifies the mistaken view that one must decide either between atomism, and thus deny the possibility of genuinely collective intentionality, or else endorse collectivism. In contrast, what Chelstrom aims to establish is a 'middle position' between these two 'extremes', namely 'non-atomistic individualism' (pp. 2, 133). This specifically Husserlian alternative shall equally serve as a 'middle position between solipsism and collectivism', encapsulated in the slogan 'intersubjectivity without subjectivity is incoherent' (p. 196f.). The task for Chelstrom, then, is not to pit an atomistic-*cum*-solipsistic *solus ipse*, which would be cut off from social encounters and collective engagements, against a collectivism, which 'prioritize[s] the social over the individual', or to 'trad[e] one mummified concept for the other', but, rather, to describe how individual subjects, 'from the outset … immersed in a socially enriched and conditioned world of meanings' (p. 206f.) actually experience both intersubjective and communal intentional achievements in thought, intention or action.

According to the phenomenological core claim regarding the intrinsic correlation between intentionality and consciousness (incidentally, shared also by Searle), in the first two chapters, Chelstrom sets out with a phenomenological (ch. 1) and a metaphysical (ch. 2) critique of the concept of collective consciousness. This critique is not only rigorously argued, but represents, to my knowledge, the most thorough critical discussion to date.

The punchline of Chelstrom's argument directed at collectivists, such as, above all, K. Mathiesen, is that CI, both in the sense of practical-agential *intentions* (the German *Absicht*) and in the sense of the *intentionality* of the mental/consciousness, is derived from the intentionality of individual conscious subjects and agents. Here, Chelstrom also disambiguates the intentionality of genuine 'subjectivities', as distinct from the merely 'formal subject'-status of plural subjects. Accordingly, Chelstrom distinguishes plural subjects as experiential unities, experienced as such by conscious subjects (subjectivities), on the one hand, and the formal sense of plural subjects, lacking intrinsic intentionality and hence consciousness of their own, on the other hand (p. 24f.). Moreover, Chelstrom argues that the jointness in practical collective intentions and agency is derivative of its (experiential) base in individual intentions and acts (see also ch. 5). Importantly, while Chelstrom does not deny that individual's conscious experience might be affected in their intentional content, mode, or phenomenal quality by their (experiential, formal, participatory, etc.) relation to plural subjects, and, indeed, throughout the book, furnishes ample

illustration for such collective-to-individual 'feedbacks', what he rejects is the, arguably, fallacious entailment that plural subjects themselves would have conscious experiences.

Chelstrom however, in my view, overextends his 'no-bearer view' of plural subjects, when he refuses them the status of being full-fledged intentional agents, or of having a mental domain of their own. One possible line of argument, favored, e.g., by Philip Pettit, Carol Rovane, and others, including, for what it's worth, myself, which Chelstrom does not consider (here, esp. Pettit's more recent, highly influential works are saliently missing), is to disambiguate not only formal subjects and experiential-agential subjectivity, but also conscious, mental, agential and personal properties. According to this alternative, the latter three properties are not necessarily tied to intrinsic intentionality and consciousness, but rather to rational, epistemological, agential and moral faculties, which certain robustly integrated groups may well be endowed with. That is, while one may well share Chelstrom's disinclination to the 'urge to reify' or 'hypostatize' intersubjective relations to the effect of postulating a collective subject(ivity) with a consciousness of its own (pp. 64, 116) – a mistake that Chelstrom rightly equates with a 'fallacy of composition' (pp. 30, 58), or a 'homuncular fallacy' (p. 58) – a more explicit differentiation of the concept of collective consciousness from cognate, but ultimately different concepts and properties, such as, above all, 'group minds' and 'group persons', would have, if not defeated, at least better served Chelstrom's cause. In any case, overall, Chelstrom's discussion of the concept of collective consciousness, his assessment of the alleged three requirements for collective (conscious) experience, viz. the 'plurality', 'collectivity' and 'awareness requirements' (Mathiesen) (pp. 26–41), and the alleged failure of three different theses concerning collective mindedness/consciousness, viz. the 'group mind', the 'emergent mind' and the 'socially embedded mind' theses (pp. 53–68), to meet these requirements, certainly counts among the best in the respective literature. (In this connection, though, a discussion of the rapidly growing body of work on the emergent group cognition and group mind thesis in the cognitive sciences may have added to Chelstrom's argument.)

The second major recurrent theme of the book is, as noted, the issue of individualism versus collectivism, which Chelstrom pursues in detail, critiquing quite different proponents of collectivism, as identified by him, to wit, not all of whom are standardly conceived as such, let alone are self-professed collectivists, including Kay Mathiesen (ch. 1), Hans Bernhard Schmid (chs. 2, 4), David Carr (ch. 3), or, most famously, Margaret Gilbert (ch. 5). Here, Chelstrom productively employs and further develops an important distinction, originally suggested by Schmid, between 'formal' and 'subject collectivism/individualism' (pp. 78, 110ff.), the first concerning the issue whether the form or mode of collective intentions ('we-mode' or 'we-intentions') are reducible to a set or aggregation of reciprocal 'I-intentions', the latter whether the class of possible 'bearer-subjects' of intentions are restricted to individuals or may

range over collectives. While Chelstrom champions subject individualism (contra Schmid, Gilbert & Co.), he rejects (siding with Searle against Michael Bratman) formal individualism. The emerging position, then, amounts to an anti-atomistic construal of individualism.

Although, overall, Chelstrom provides compelling reasons for his anti-(subject-)collectivist reading of plural subjects along Husserlian lines, from a scholarly point of view, the interpretative case and, specifically, the textual evidences in Husserl that Chelstrom refers to, are less clear-cut. This is largely due to the fact that Chelstrom does not consult any of the extensive original German works of Husserl on intersubjectivity (comprising, after all, some 2000 pages), which represents a rather serious omission. Though this, unfortunately, only reflects the by now common practice of non-German Husserl scholars, given that it occasionally distorts the interpretation, this circumstance is noteworthy enough. It becomes especially problematic, for example, when Chelstrom claims that, contrary to Mathiesen's, to be sure, for other reasons justly criticized interpretation, Husserl would in 'in no way exten[d] a sense of subjectivity to intersubjective groupings of subjects … and does not speak of [plural subjects] as subjectivities whatsoever' (p. 51). This, however, as a number of Husserl's published (German) research manuscripts on intersubjectivity well proves, is plainly false. Husserl does, in fact, repeatedly, speak of such 'higher order subjectivities', using a variety of subjectivist and personalist analogies and metaphors, and at times even goes so far as to attribute (self-)conscious properties to groups. Now, even if one, ultimately, agrees with Chelstrom's interpretation, as I indeed do, he would have been well advised to more carefully explore the rich Husserlian oeuvre.

Similarly, Chelstrom's (pp. 2ff.) reluctance to endorse holism regarding Husserl's conception of the structure of individual intentional states and contents and, in particular, their constitutive relation to social and collective regularities, is not motivated well enough. For, one could very well defend subjective individualism and yet embrace holism, the two being far from incompatible, even though, admittedly, neither entails the other. The resulting position, 'holistic individualism', approximates the view of Pettit, and Chelstrom, indeed, sees it, and rightly so, 'embodied in Husserlian phenomenology' (p. 167; cf. 155ff., 167, 211). Chelstrom, thus, seems to link holism too closely with collectivism. This is unfortunate, for a correct holistic interpretation of Husserl's theory of (collective) intentionality would have lent further credence to Chelstrom's insight that, for Husserl, 'one's consciousness is conditioned by the presence of others – both formally and materially' (p. 205), even if, as he hastens to add (inter alia against Robert Sokolowski's radical meaning holism; ch. 7), that the '"we" does not precede "I"' (p. 205). Additionally, an appropriate holistic framework could have underscored Chelstrom's stress on the role of the (intra- and intersubjective) horizon-structure of intentionality, as expounded by a number of phenomenologists, such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty

or Gurwitsch (cf. ch. 4; an issue that Chelstrom takes up in his discussion of Gadamer and the problem of an intersubjective 'fusion of horizons' in ch. 6).

In terms of conceptual clarification, one may also wonder why Chelstrom chiefly uses the very concept 'plural subjects', given that he deeply challenges the well-established theory that bears this very name, Gilbert's 'plural subject account' of CI. The main phenomenological (and Searlean internalist) argument against Gilbert, and incidentally Schmid's collectivism, is that individuals may well phenomenally have communal experiences, without there being, in fact, a plural subject, or a reciprocal joint commitment, satisfying the respective individual's experiences (pp. 147–55). Basically, I agree with Chelstrom in stressing the often downplayed distinction between the conditions of satisfaction, or evidentiary fulfillment conditions (typically, objective or intersubjective state of affaires) and the intentional content of experiences (pp. 92–115f.). However, I contend that Chelstrom, again, overextends this possibility, resulting in his all too 'flexible' and 'inclusive' view (p. 163), allowing not only young children and some animals (e.g., dogs), but even inanimate objects like imaginary toy-friends to be full-fledged candidates of CI (pp. 149–53), not to speak of the Searlean internalist possibility, rightly contested by Schmid, of brains-in-the-vat having collective intentions (cf. pp. 92f.).

On the positive side again, as to his conceptual clarifications, throughout the book, Chelstrom makes a number of original conceptual distinctions and adjustments, which are most helpful in disambiguating even some of the most general problems in contemporary discussions of CI. Thus, beyond those mentioned, he points for example to various 'ways of understanding collectives' (p. 37) and 'types of being with' (pp. 134ff.), distinguishes 'constitutive collective intentionality' and 'collectively informed intentions' (p. 93f.), the intentional 'character', or 'mode' and intentional 'content' of CI (p. 114), 'collective adherence' and 'collective acceptance' (p. 125), etc. Not least, Chelstrom rightly emphasizes as a crucial addendum to contemporary accounts the 'heterogeneous nature of social phenomena' (p. 133), which he also amply exemplifies throughout the book.

The important issue of normativity and moral accountability of plural subjects gets a rather raw deal, however. Chelstrom primarily discusses social normativity in his rebuttal of Schmid's concerns (in turn, directed against Searle) that social normativity cannot be accounted for within an individualist framework of CI (pp. 115f., see also 156f., 194f.). Even if Chelstrom is well aware of that, and duly notes that he is not concerned with the question of the moral status and accountability of plural agents, since he does not deny that collectives may be subjects of moral evaluation (p. 44), and since the issue of collectivism, standardly conceived, turns much on that, one would have liked to hear more.

Lastly, although Chelstrom provides most reliable discussions of most of the major participants of the current CI-debate and, moreover, authoritatively reviews a remarkable range of phenomenologists, including some largely

neglected but important figures, such as Schütz, Gurwitsch, and Gadamer, somewhat surprisingly, Chelstrom omits the immensely rich social ontologies of early phenomenologists such as Edith Stein, Gerda Walther, and Tomoo Otaka, altogether. Surely, this is a book on 'Husserlian phenomenology'; however, Chelstrom (p. 160) himself takes this to be a rather 'broad phrase', as opposed to later Heideggerian and French phenomenology.

All these critical points should in no way detract from the many merits of the present book. Quite the contrary; overall, it's safe to say, the book is a major achievement in the field and is to be highly recommended. It is not only knowledgeable and, notwithstanding some of the mentioned lacunae, well researched, moreover, one of its invaluable virtues is to not merely avow, but indeed to take seriously the task of bridging the gap between analytic and phenomenological approaches to the topic, while not remaining neutral and yet being well balanced. Accordingly, Chelstrom's book well deserves the attention not only of Husserl scholars, but of anyone seriously interested in the phenomenology of social reality, including, notably, analytic philosophers. The result, then, is a successful mélange of the two traditions, combining up-to-date phenomenological analysis of how we experience and act upon social reality with the argumentative rigor and clarity of analytic social ontology.

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La Chair des Images: Merleau-Ponty Entre Peinture et Cinéma
By Mauro Carbone
Vrin, 2011. Pp. 168. ISBN 978-2-711-62382-2.
€15.20/$28.80 (pbk).

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical life was devoted to finding a stable ground for thought that would avoid the traps of stabilizing thought. In other words, it was an attempt to do theory without forgetting that theory was only one of the aspects of the world it observed, and thus both required – and constantly exceeded – the world.

This challenge, as Mauro Carbone fully appreciates, is intrinsically linked to a critical examination of modernity, for modernity denotes a 'mutation in the relations between mankind and Being that Merleau-Ponty saw at work in our times' (p. 158). Indeed, it seems that the critical point named modernity denotes the crisis in the relations between theory and the world, both insofar as their interconnection is made more visible than ever, and their union more problematic than ever. Merleau-Ponty did not believe that such mutations could